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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIJING 003730

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TAGS: PHUM PREL PGOV CH

SUBJECT: HUMAN RIGHTS: NYT'S ZHAO YAN RELEASED AFTER
DETENTION, BARRED FROM PURSUING EARTHQUAKE STORY

Classified By: Political Internal Unit Chief
Dan Kritenbrink. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Well-known New York Times researcher and PRC citizen Zhao Yan (protect) told PolOff September 22 that he had been detained for questioning in Beijing by Guangxi provincial security officials September 10-12 over his connection to several Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region residents who had traveled to Beijing to protest the seizure and destruction of their property. Zhao, who had been interviewing the would-be protestors, was detained by Guangxi security officials as he exited a Beijing apartment used by the group. Zhao attributes his release after a three-day standoff with authorities both to entreaties by the New York Times and to the failure of Guangxi officials to obtain Central Government approval for his detention. In a separate incident, following the May 12 Sichuan earthquake PRC security officials ordered Zhao to stop investigating whether Sichuan Province authorities had barred Wenchuan City from issuing a pre-quake warning. End Summary.

Zhao Yan Detained, Released

¶2. (C) Well-known New York Times researcher and PRC citizen Zhao Yan told PolOff September 22 that Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region security officials had detained him for questioning in Beijing on September 10, eventually releasing him on September 12. (Note: PolOff requested the meeting with Zhao, following media reports of his detention. Zhao previously had become a high-profile human rights case following his detention in September 2004 over a New York Times story that correctly predicted Jiang Zemin would resign as the then-head of China's Central Military Commission. Zhao served three years in prison before being released in September 2007.)

¶3. (C) Zhao said he had been in an apartment in northern Beijing when Guangxi provincial security officials arrived to apprehend Huang Liuhong and 10 other Guangxi residents who had traveled to Beijing to protest the seizure and destruction of their property in their hometown of Liuzhou. (Note: Huang and others reportedly applied on August 20 for a permit to hold a lawful protest in one of the three Olympic protest zones established in Beijing by Chinese authorities but were forced by Guangxi officials to return to Liuzhou the next day by train. Despite warnings not to return to Beijing, Zhao said the Guangxi residents arrived back in the capital on September 8 in hopes of organizing protests at Tiananmen Square and other venues to publicize their plight. The Guangxi residents reportedly contacted Zhao after their arrival in Beijing, and he visited them on September 10 for the purpose of arranging later interviews with a New York

Times journalist.

14. (C) After Guangxi security officials showed up unannounced on September 10, Zhao said he was the last person out of the apartment, and that he tried to photograph Huang and others as 20-30 uniformed security officials apprehended and removed them to vehicles. Another 40-50 officers were on location near the Beijing apartment building, many in plain clothes and unmarked vehicles. Zhao said security officials were surprised to see a journalist emerge from the apartment and were angry with him for attempting to take pictures. They initially assumed he worked for a Chinese media outlet.

15. (C) Guangxi officials repeatedly asked Zhao how he learned about the Guangxi petitioners, Zhao said. He refused to explain, except on condition that the officials show their identification and reveal their sources of information, which they of course refused to do. A Beijing security official, noting that Zhao had "stayed out of trouble" since his September 2007 release from prison, asked why Zhao had an interest in the Guangxi protestors. (Note: Zhao said Beijing and Guangxi security officials appeared to have cooperated in the operation to detain the would-be Guangxi protestors.) After a three-day standoff, officials let Zhao go. Zhao said he was not physically harmed. He attributes his release both to entreaties by the New York Times and to the failure of Guangxi officials to obtain Central Government approval for his detention. Zhao said he remains under close surveillance and is concerned that he may yet have "trouble with officials" in the future. (Note: Zhao did not request assistance from the Embassy, but he did welcome PolOff's offer to maintain contact and monitor his situation.)

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Zhao Ordered to Stop Investigating Earthquake Story

16. (C) Zhao told PolOff the September 10 episode was his second brush with PRC security officials following his September 2007 release from prison. The earlier incident came after the May 12 Sichuan Earthquake, as Zhao pursued "a story" that Sichuan Province officials allegedly barred Wenchuan City authorities from issuing a May 10 statement warning of a possible earthquake. According to Zhao, Wenchuan officials deduced the earthquake risk from seismologic data gathered in Beijing and from "special Chinese methods" including observations of frogs and other animals. Public security officials at some point ordered Zhao to stop investigating his story, which Zhao said he had hoped would pressure Sichuan and Beijing officials to make "a full accounting." According to Zhao, former New York Times bureau chief Joe Kahn, who frequently lobbied the Chinese Government during Zhao's 2004-2007 imprisonment, told him to "back off" from the story in order to avoid another lengthy detention or imprisonment.

Comment

17. (C) Zhao's September 10 detention and his being warned off of the earthquake story demonstrate both that Zhao has returned to his trademark style of aggressive investigative journalism, and that PRC authorities continue to restrict the ability of journalists to report freely. The September 10 incident also provides further confirmation of the widespread practice whereby provincial security authorities operating in Beijing detain provincial residents before they can air their grievances in the nation's capital, either to Central Government officials by calling on a "letters and visits" office, or as in this case, by attempting to stage a public protest.

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